The Puzzle House (scraps)

Dump 1

Zero Philosophy
Feb 16, 2021

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Oldest of the large interminably incomplete fiction pieces, ***The Puzzle House*** *is built upon derelict strata that will never be part of anything, so chunks of those are being dumped here, to get them out of the way.*

"There is no 'inner office'," Angela Clough stated confidently. "I mean, really! Absurd tales of secret administrative rituals. Sometimes it's all too easy to understand why people are locked up here."

She was due for release in under a week, or so she insisted, and seemed absolutely to believe. Almost immediately upon learning the news of her impending discharge she had begun to systematically dismantle the cat's cradle of myth holding the institutionalized micro-society together. This was only the latest phase.

Within an hour of returning from her progress review session, just three days before, she had interrupted a conversation between Susan Burton and Jennifer Harris in the canteen, to ask, bluntly: "How do we know that Rose Parker ever existed?"

"She was my closest friend," Burton had protested in outrage.

"And then she mysteriously disappeared?" The sarcasm was implicit.

"She was *taken*."

"Taken where?" Clough asked, with maddening reasonableness.

"You're not seriously saying *we made her up?*" Burton howled. She was close to tears.

Now, three days later, Burton was still sulking, woundedly. She refused to make eye-contact with Clough, muttering something that was perhaps 'oh, can't you just shut up' under her breath, while unconsciously wringing her hands in slow anguish. Harris, sitting beside Burton, scowled supportively at their common enemy.

"And another thing," Clough continued, unconcerned. "We don't have SENS. None of us do. It *doesn't exist*. This so-called 'syndrome' was invented to coddle us – to excuse us from our mental

weaknesses. It's a screen. Just cover for psychological inadequacies that we need to face up to."

There were gasps at this.

Nurse Lapton turned ashen, and gnawed at her lower lip. It would have been pointless to try hiding her deep distress at this sudden – if actually easily predictable – development. She was standing in as replacement for the appointed group leader, by default, and already desperately regretted it. When Dr. Boggs had not turned up, it would have been better to suspend the session, perhaps even cancel it – although the radicality of that last counter-factual option twisted her nerves by another quarter-cycle. *Was there any limit to the airing of wildly irresponsible speculation here?* she wondered. "Conspiracy theories are highly informative," Dr. Boggs had insisted, repeatedly, endorsing an official principle that had been established by Henderson himself. Yet, even if therapeutic protocol refused to impose one, there surely had to be *some* objective social or institutional outer line, beyond which nothing could be imagined at all, unless crisis, and then collapse? Even Clough – *who had always been a trouble-maker*, Lapton thought bitterly – had never gone this far before. It verged upon open insurrection already. She would keep pushing, until things splintered.

"Bullshit," Harris spat softly, but fractionally above the threshold of audibility.

"Jenny, please," Lapton intervened. "There's no need for that kind of hostility, *whatever the provocation*."

Harris merely scowled.

"I'm sorry Nurse," Clough ploughed on, without any serious hint of embarrassment. "But there's far too much nonsense accepted as gospel in this place, I mean, really bizarre ideas – *lunacies* – desperately maintained to serve as crutches for broken people." She looked around, pityingly. "Eventually I realized that. Then I picked myself up, pulled myself out of dependency, and moved beyond it – psychologically and spiritually. That's called *a cure*, and it's why I'm getting out of this *insane asylum*. There should be a lesson in that, for everybody in this room. I'm trying to share it."

"Bitch," Harris said, giving voice to the meeting's silent consensus.

Lapton granted her a disapproving look, but said nothing.

"You're not getting out," Harris continued. "No one ever has, or will. We all know too much. *Even you* have to see that. No one is fooled by your smug idiot act."

"Please," Lapton begged.

“There you *go again*,” Clough responded, ignoring the nurse’s pitiful intervention. Her voice had risen by a whole octave. “Can’t you hear what it sounds like? It sounds like madness. Paranoid madness. ‘Jet fuel can’t melt steel beams.’”

For Donald Saunders, this new twist upon an already-chaotic digression was a development beyond all tolerance. “Can we please get back to the Inner Office discussion?” he demanded. The ‘back room’ was his particular research interest. He had become quietly convinced, recently, that the Therapy Sessions had been productively spiraling in upon it, so the present diversion of collective attention, into squabbles around incomprehensibly-oestrogenized women’s issues, was a torment. “Let us all, please, take a step back,” he recommended, with all the solemnity he could muster.

Lapton squinted at him suspiciously. He was another ‘trouble-maker’ in her opinion, all the more subversive for his condescending intellectualism. Worse still, Dr. Boggs appeared to like Saunders – even to respect him – going so far as to solicit his opinion on matters of genuine substance on occasions. Had ‘fraternization’ been an accessible item of vocabulary for her, it would have been the word to use. There was a moment of white-hot hatred, a pure oxy-acetelene brain-stem flame, in which she imagined Dr. Boggs hideously, lethally mutilated, to the point of dismemberment, yet still screaming, sobbing uselessly for forgivenness. She extinguished it quickly. An abysmal melancholy took its place. She said nothing.

“Two weeks ago,” Saunders continued, “we were close to identifying where the Inner Office had to be. If I could just use the whiteboard Nurse.”

She nodded numbly. The request had been merely perfunctory, as everyone understood.

With a blue marker, he deftly reproduced a map of the Institute.

“So where do we look for dark space?” he asked, with a rhetorical force designed to over-ride any inclination to interrupt. “The West Wing? Hell no, utterly unthinkable. Here on the East Wing? We can safely rule that out, I’m sure everyone can agree. Unless there are attic areas, or tunnels, but they would have to be accessed from somewhere else.” The marker flicked across the board frenetically, submitting its primordial vacancy to azurean resolution. “So we end up here,” he concluded, his voice rising to indicate the approaching theoretical triumph. “Back in the Atrium, the nexus of doors, where everything is finally decided.”

He looked around, to make sure the audience was with him, but he needn’t have done. They were gripped. Even the most difficult cases – Lapton and Clough – were caught in the flow, silently attentive.

“Where do we look for the meaning of SENS?” He paused, dramatically, and then stabbed the marker violently into a blank space buried among blue squiggles to the immediate north of the Atrium. “Here.”

“The meaning of SENS is A-Death,” Brett Hodges butted in, without warning.

“And what’s the meaning of that?” Saunders snapped, determined to quell this new insurgency at its origin.

Hodges was too socially disconnected to pick up the signal. Delighted by what he took to be an indication of engagement, he sought to build upon the question. “Could I just …?”

Saunders realized, with horror, that Hodges was reaching for the marker, wanting – unmistakably – to soil the diagram with his own nonsensical hypotheses. Nothing less than a drastic response would suffice. He stepped forward decisively and slapped Hodges hard across the face, almost knocking him from his chair.

“Sorry Brett, old buddy,” he said. “You were becoming hysterical.”

There was a moment of tense silence in the room, and then a general relaxation back into acceptance. Hodges sat frozen, his gaze averted downwards to the floor, face flushed with shame.

“Let’s not allow ourselves to be diverted,” Saunders continued, ruffling Hodges’ thinning hair condescendingly. “We’re getting close.”

7 Comments

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You really should consider not using adverbial qualifiers with every action verb it’s kinda undergrad creative writing class 101 shit

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(((:):))(:):::: Feb 18, 2021

THERAPY SESSIONS = AQ-347 = BOUT OF PSYCHOSIS.

SENS = AQ-93 = OMIT. (Which I'll take as a cue not to give the game away too publicly.)

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